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ABSTRACT

The great majority of the Founding Fathers were readers. In fact, the leading political figures of late eighteenth-century America were generally, and often intimately, acquainted with the output of the greatest European minds of the day--and of the minds of the ancient western world. Two factors above all placed an ineffaceable stamp on the reading habits of the American revolutionaries: (1) the prevailing mode of their education was rigorous, classical, and thoroughly book-oriented; and (2) the political and social upheaval of which they were the architects and beneficiaries caused them to consult the experience of the past to make sense of their current tribulations and to guide them in their epic task of nation-building. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, two of the most intellectual of the Founding Fathers, took extraordinary pains to create not just serviceable personal libraries but collections of superlative quality. Most noteworthy about the Founding Fathers' reading habits was their tendency to regard books not as ornaments but as tools. The Founding Fathers were readers, collectors, users, and creators of books. A few of them went further and became founders of institutional libraries. Through books, they sought both knowledge and self-knowledge, the means by which better to live. (RS)

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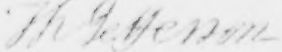
cannot
live
without
books..."



to
John Adams,
1815

Books and the Founding Fathers

GEORGE H. NASH

a lecture
to commemorate
the Year of the Reader,
delivered on
November 1, 1987

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Foreword

Books, libraries, and the life of the mind are vital American traditions. This fact is easy to forget in our "information age," which is dominated by technology, a sense of urgency, and an underlying assumption that what is new is good—and thus important. The tradition of books, reading, and libraries is more contemplative but just as important to our country as the exciting technological developments that also are part of our history. As George H. Nash demonstrates in this essay, books and reading were essential ingredients in the founding of the United States. Today thoughtful, well-informed citizens are still essential to our democratic way of life; and books, reading, and libraries are still the keys. But our nation and the world of books face serious challenges: namely, illiteracy, the inability to read, and aliteracy, the reluctance to read even when one knows how. We must work together to renew the tradition of America as a "Nation of Readers."

The Center for the Book in the Library of Congress was established in 1977 to stimulate public awareness and appreciation of books, reading, and libraries. A small office that depends on others to carry out its ideas, the center has seen its catalytic function expand dramatically within the past few years with the establishment of affiliated centers for the book in seventeen states or regions of the United States. The symposia, lectures, projects, and publications of the Center for the Book and its affiliates are

supported primarily by private contributions from individuals, corporations, and foundations. Projects are also cosponsored with U.S. government agencies, and in this instance the Center for the Book gratefully acknowledges support from the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science.

A professional historian and lecturer, George H. Nash is also one of the presidentially appointed commissioners of the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science. A graduate of Amherst College and Harvard University, where he received his Ph.D. in history, Dr. Nash has been engaged since 1975 in preparing a multivolume, scholarly biography of Herbert Hoover. The first volume, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: The Engineer, 1874–1914*, was published by W.W. Norton in 1983 and the second, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: The Humanitarian, 1914–1917*, in 1988; both have been well received. In addition to the life of Herbert Hoover, Dr. Nash's areas of specialization are American conservatism and twentieth-century American political and intellectual history.

The Center for the Book's reading promotion theme in 1987 was "The Year of the Reader," and a public law, a presidential proclamation, and executive orders or proclamations from the governors of twelve states made the celebration truly national. George Nash's lecture, "Books and the Founding Fathers," was presented in commemoration of the Year of the Reader and the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution on November 1, 1987, under the auspices of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution. It is a pleasure to present it to a wide audience.

JOHN Y. COLE
Director
The Center for the Book

It is a happy coincidence that this year of the Bicentennial of the Constitution is also—by official edict—the Year of the Reader. In so designating it some months ago, the Congress of the United States declared that America is "built on ideas expressed through books and the printed word." In his ensuing proclamation of the Year of the Reader, President Reagan observed that "our history demonstrates that literacy and real political freedom go hand in hand." "Our Nation's heritage of liberty and self-government," he added, "depends on a literate, informed citizenry."

In the past eleven years, as Americans have celebrated the two hundredth anniversary of our independence and of the Constitution that secured it, we have been treated to a veritable feast of books and articles assessing the achievement of the men who comprised the revolutionary generation. Just this year more than a dozen scholarly volumes have been published—narrating, interpreting, and documenting the process by which the Founding Fathers and their contemporaries created a regime of government unique in all history. In my lecture today I shall not tread directly on this now familiar ground. Instead, I propose to explore a theme that has received comparatively less attention. In this Year of the Reader, I wish to examine some of the ways that the written word—specifically, books and libraries—molded the remarkable elite that made and preserved our revolution.

The first observation that comes forcibly to mind as we begin our inquiry is that the great majority of the Founding Fathers* were, in fact, readers. Surveying the records of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and of the state ratifying conventions that followed and examining the political/philosophical tracts produced by Federalists and Anti-Federalists alike, one is struck repeatedly by the debaters' invocation of history, particularly that of ancient Rome and post-Elizabethan Britain. With seeming ease and obvious confidence that their audiences would understand them, they referred to past episodes and personages, thereby exhibiting a form of knowledge derived, in the last analysis, from books. This impression is reinforced by perusal of the political pamphlet literature that flourished in astonishing profusion in America between 1763 and the 1790s—pamphlets often replete with Latin quotations as well as references to ancient and modern authors. Our impression grows even stronger when we sample the correspondence of the Founding Fathers—most notably, the incomparable letters exchanged by Thomas Jefferson and John Adams in their old age. "Reading is my delight," wrote Jefferson to Adams late in life. In letter after scintillating letter, the two men exchanged views on books that they had been reading.

The Founding Fathers' acquaintance with the written word was not confined to works in the English language. For many of them, Greek and Latin were virtually second tongues. Jefferson was fluent in French and Spanish as well, and he was not the only one with such linguistic ability. All in all, late eighteenth-century America was a demonstrably literate civilization; its literacy rate, in fact, was the highest in the world. And at its apex was a sin-

*By "Founding Fathers" I refer not just to the fifty-five men who convened in Philadelphia in 1787 but also to their leading contemporaries—such as John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Jay, and Patrick Henry—who did not attend but who obviously shaped the founding era.

gular array of individuals who were men of learning as well as men of power.

What did these busy lawyers, merchants, agribusinessmen, and politicians actually read? From their surviving correspondence and other writings, a clear, composite picture quickly emerges. First, the men of the revolutionary generation were, for the most part, steeped in what are known as the classics. Herodotus, Thucydides, Plutarch, Tacitus, Sallust, and Cicero—from these and other famous men of letters the framers of the Constitution obtained their knowledge of ancient history. History, in fact, was of consuming interest to the Founders; it was not just something they had to study in school. Nor was its subject matter confined to far-off Greece and Rome. The history of modern Great Britain—and particularly its generations-long internal struggles for liberty—had, for the catalysts of our independence, an endless appeal. Not surprisingly, many of them were strongly attracted to the so-called Whig theory of history, propounded by (among others) the British writer Catherine Macaulay, whose eight-volume *History of England* (1763–83) achieved great popularity on this side of the Atlantic. When Mrs. Macaulay, who sympathized with the American cause, visited the United States in 1785, she was entertained by George Washington himself at Mount Vernon.

Ranking with history as a focus of the Founders' reading interests was what we today call political philosophy. Their favorite sources were extraordinarily varied: from Aristotle among the ancients to their Scottish contemporary David Hume ("The Judicious Hume," Alexander Hamilton once labeled him). Particularly prominent on the Founders' bookshelves was the outpouring of eighteenth-century English libertarian or "Opposition" literature exemplified by Bolingbroke, James Burgh, and *Cato's Letters*, by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. Another exceedingly popular political theorist was John Locke, whose *Two Treatises of Government* achieved almost iconic status. Jefferson ranked Locke with Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton as the three

greatest men who had ever lived. Also significant was the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment, particularly in the emerging field of political economy pioneered by Sir James Steuart and Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). From France came Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* (1748) and, a generation later, the writings of the physiocrats. From Switzerland came the natural law writings of Burlamaqui and Vattel.

This is not the place to appraise the relative impact of the streams of thought represented by these towering and extremely diverse thinkers. My point, rather, is that the leading political figures of late eighteenth-century America were generally, and often intimately, acquainted with the output of the greatest European minds of their day—and of the minds of the ancient western world. I repeat: the Founding Fathers, with few exceptions, were readers.

Not surprisingly, since so many of them by profession were lawyers, Sir William Blackstone's massive *Commentaries on English Law* became a fixture of their personal libraries and a resource that they repeatedly cited in public debate. And although history, political philosophy, and law dominated their serious reading, these practical-minded statesmen were by no means unfamiliar with literature—or, as it was then often called, belles lettres. John Adams, for instance, owned complete sets of Homer, Plato, Horace, Ovid, and Marcus Aurelius—to mention a few of the classical authors most popular in his generation. The Bible and Shakespeare also formed part of the literary patrimony of the Founders. Even contemporary English poetry and fiction did not escape their attention. In his later years Adams, for one, frankly enjoyed what he called "romances." In this, however, the fathers of our country were not unanimous. The somewhat didactic Jefferson told a friend in 1818 that the novels of his day were a "mass of trash"—"poison [that] infects the mind" and becomes "a great obstacle of good education." Fiction should have moral utility, he argued. "Nothing of mere amusement," he declared, "should lumber a public library."

Two factors above all placed an ineffaceable stamp on the reading habits of the American revolutionaries. The first was the prevailing mode of their education: rigorous, classical, and thoroughly book-oriented. As early as the ages of eight or nine, either in schools or in the custody of private tutors, colonial boys entered into concentrated study of Greek and Latin. This was no casual affectation; demonstrated proficiency in these languages was a prerequisite to entrance into college (and more than half of the fifty-five men who convened in Philadelphia in 1787 were college graduates). Upon entering college, which American males in those days customarily did in their early to mid-teens, they could expect to encounter most of the authors whom I have previously mentioned.

Consider, for example, the higher education of William Paterson, who later represented New Jersey at the Constitutional Convention. After passing entrance examinations in Latin and Greek, he enrolled in the College of New Jersey (now Princeton) in 1759, at the age of fourteen. For the next four years he immersed himself in ancient history and literature, as well as such English authors as Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, and Pope. Here also—like James Madison, who matriculated after him—young Paterson took the required senior course in moral philosophy, a crucial transmission belt for the ideas that young men absorbed about human conduct. It was, in part, through Princeton's curriculum that the writings of such eminent Scottish social theorists as Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and Thomas Reid entered American intellectual and political life.

Even legal education was not exempt from this relentlessly bookish approach to learning. Consider the course of study that Thomas Jefferson composed in 1767 (at age twenty-four) for a friend about to study to be a lawyer. Before you do, Jefferson counseled, you must "absolutely" learn Latin and French and should become conversant with mathematics, astronomy, geography, and natural philosophy. Having laid this foundation, said Jefferson, his friend could properly embark on his quest.

This, however, was only the beginning. With characteristic thoroughness, Jefferson next prescribed a systematic outline of study for his friend, including every single book that the would-be lawyer should read. Before eight o'clock in the morning he should employ himself in what Jefferson called "Physical Studies," including agriculture, chemistry, anatomy, zoology, botany, ethics, "natural" religion, "sectarian" religion, and natural law. From eight until noon he should read law. From twelve to one he should read politics; during the afternoon, history. From dark until bedtime he should concentrate on belles lettres (notably Shakespeare), criticism, rhetoric, and oratory, particularly the orations of Demosthenes and Cicero. In other words, to obtain a satisfactory legal education one should read books for as many as twelve hours a day—and only a third of that time books about law!

If Jefferson's advice appears manifestly utopian to us, one suspects that it seemed much less so to his contemporaries. Only fourteen years before the future Sage of Monticello offered his formidable regimen to his young acquaintance, another American statesman-in-the-making, John Dickinson, sailed to London for four strenuous years of legal studies. Rising daily at five o'clock in the morning, he would read for nearly eight hours, dine at four, and then retire early in the evening—all the while mingling his scrutiny of legal texts with such authors as Tacitus and Bacon. In 1757, his formal education complete, Dickinson returned to Pennsylvania and a distinguished career culminating in the "miracle at Philadelphia."

This, then, was the first influence that made the Founding Fathers the kind of readers they were. In eighteenth-century America, education was a serious enterprise, entailing disciplined exposure to the "great tradition" of classical and enlightened learning. The colonial educational system imbued in its ablest matriculants a lifelong practice of diligent, humanistic reading. Perhaps it is not so surprising that one of the Constitution's framers, Benjamin Franklin, was the inventor of bifocals!

The second factor that profoundly affected the Founders' reading was, of course, the political and social upheaval of which they were the architects and beneficiaries. The illustrious men whom we celebrate today were contemplative activists engaged in a daring endeavor to which they had solemnly pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. Under these circumstances, it is not so startling that they repeatedly consulted the experience of the past—as recorded in works of history, law, and political theory—both to make sense of their current tribulations and to guide them in their epic task of nation-building. In a letter to his wife in 1780, during the most dismal days of the American Revolution, John Adams explained why he read the genres of literature that he did:

> I must study politics and war, that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain.

For Adams the kind of reading one permitted oneself in life was directly related to political conditions. The right to read books in the arts had to be earned.

The Founding Fathers' interest in books as a means of understanding "politics and war" had another, less conservative dimension. Like many European men of learning in that age known as the Enlightenment, the Americans who met in Philadelphia in 1787 believed that human nature was both universal and immutable and that through the comparative study of past civilizations they could adduce the fundamental principles of human behavior. In other words, history—particularly the history of ancient republics—could yield pertinent lessons for men embroiled in fashioning the unprecedented: a self-governing republic on a continental scale. In short, by careful historical research one could hope to gain an understanding of what Alexander Hamilton, in *Federalist* no. 9, unabashedly called the "science of

politics." It was part of the Founders' faith that the "science of politics" had advanced so rapidly in "modern times" as to render feasible their experiment in ordered liberty.

If the Founders by education and circumstance were led to become active readers of books, an impressive number of them were also collectors of books. In one respect, I suppose, this should not surprise us. In the 1770s and 1780s transportation in America was slow, and institutional repositories of knowledge rather few. Public libraries, as we know them today, did not exist. In a real sense, every man of affairs had to be his own librarian. Still, at least a few of the builders of the new nation did far more than what was minimally required for their own edification. Benjamin Franklin's personal library, for example, contained 4,276 volumes at the time of his death in 1790. George Washington's comprised 884 volumes when he died nine years later—a figure all the more remarkable since he was much less of a reader than many. Even Patrick Henry, whose only formal education was provided by his father and his uncle, and whose forte was the spoken rather than the written word, assembled a respectable 150 titles, including both ancient and modern classics. How many Americans today have libraries that could compare with these?

Early in their careers, two of the most intellectual of the Founding Fathers took extraordinary pains to create not just serviceable personal libraries but collections of superlative quality. Writing in his diary on January 30, 1768, John Adams, then a lawyer in Massachusetts, engaged in a fretful spasm of introspection. What was he accomplishing in life, the young professional asked himself, as he rushed from town to town leading a "wandering life."

> Am I grasping at money or scheming for power? Am I planning the illustration of my family or the welfare of my country? These are great questions. In truth, I am tossed about so much from post to pillar, that I have not leisure and tranquility enough to consider distinctly my own views, objects, and feelings.

Adams recorded that he was, at present, devoting himself primarily to collecting a library and was discovering that "a great deal of thought and care, as well as money, are necessary to assemble an ample and well chosen assortment of books."

Alas, he lamented, all this was "only a means, an instrument. Whenever I shall have completed my library, my end will not be answered. Fame, fortune, power, say some, are the ends intended by a library. The service of God, country, clients, fellow men, say others. Which of these lie nearest my heart?" Adams's mood of despair passed and he went on to find abundant purpose in his life. And when he died fifty-eight years later, the library that he had conceived as an instrument of his still-unfocused ambition had grown to nearly three thousand volumes—one of the finest collections in the United States.

While Adams, in colonial Massachusetts, was busily acquiring books, a lawyer in Virginia was assiduously doing the same. Thomas Jefferson began to collect books while a law student in Williamsburg; shortly before he turned twenty-seven he had assembled a library whose worth he calculated at the not inconsiderable sum of £200. In that year (1770) he lost it all when his home went up in flames. Undaunted, he promptly set out to amass a second library, which attained the size of 1,256 volumes in just three years. By 1783 his collection had more than doubled, and all 2,640 volumes had been elaborately cataloged by Jefferson himself according to a classification scheme derived from his hero, Sir Francis Bacon. Throughout his more than eighty-three years of life, the indefatigable Virginian never stopped buying books, lending books to friends, and advising both acquaintances and relatives on worthy books to read. While serving as ambassador to France in the mid-1780s, he devoted many a spare afternoon to rummaging through the bookstores of Paris in search of treasures, especially those relating to America. "I cannot live without books," he told John Adams in 1815. By that year Jefferson's library was probably the country's greatest personal collection.

The luminaries of the revolutionary generation were more than readers and book collectors, however. They were also, in a sense that I have already intimated, users of books. I do not mean to suggest that these extraordinary men could not enjoy reading for its own sake. Long after he had ceased to have any utilitarian reason for doing so, for instance, John Adams found delight in books. In his eighty-second year he read no fewer than forty-three of them. Jefferson in his retirement shared this enthusiasm, at one point confessing to a "canine appetite for reading." Years earlier, not long before he assumed the presidency, the Virginian wrote to a friend: "To read Latin and Greek authors in their original, is a sublime luxury."

Nevertheless, what seems most noteworthy about the Founding Fathers' reading habits, at least during their active years on the public stage, was their tendency to regard books not as ornaments but as tools. Once again, John Adams provides an apt example. In his surviving library there are more than one hundred works of eighteenth-century European political philosophy containing extensive marginal notations by Adams himself. From these sometimes mordant, often argumentative, and occasionally lengthy handwritten comments one can at times construct a virtual line-by-line dialogue between the European author (Rousseau, Voltaire, or whomever) and the feisty New Englander who penned his responses right on the printed page. In fact, a generation ago a scholar in Boston compiled these marginalia into a fascinating book entitled *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress*. It is one of the most unusual evidences we have of how the Founding Fathers reacted to books, interacted with books, used books.

Another—and very different—illustration comes from that most worldly of the Founders, Benjamin Franklin. In the year 1784, at the ripe old age of seventy-eight, Franklin wrote a letter to the son of the Puritan minister, Cotton Mather:

> When I was a boy, I met with a book, entitled "*Essays to do Good*," which I think was written by your father. It had been so little regarded

by a former possessor, that several leaves of it were torn out; but the remainder gave me such a turn of thinking, as to have an influence on my conduct through life; for I have always set a greater value on the character of a *doer of good*, than on any other kind of reputation; and if I have been, as you seem to think, a useful citizen, the public owes the advantage of it to that book.

Franklin was not the only American of his era whose entire life was profoundly affected by a book. George Washington was another; in his case the book was a play, one of the most popular plays of the eighteenth century: *Cato*, written by the Englishman Joseph Addison. In it the ancient Roman statesman Cato—wise, noble, heroic—falls on his sword at Utica rather than surrender to the conquering armies of Julius Caesar. For American audiences of the time, *Cato* was a powerful morality play, an unforgettable discourse on republican virtue and the evils of Caesarean tyranny. Not a few colonials were inspired by Addison's eloquence and fervor. Patrick Henry's immortal words "Give me liberty or give me death!" bear a noticeable resemblance to certain of Addison's verses. Nathan Hale's dying regret that he had but one life to lose for his country recalled these lines from Act IV:

> What pity is it
> That we can die but once to serve our country!

An avid theatergoer, George Washington loved this play. He quoted from it in his correspondence; he ordered it to be performed in 1778 at Valley Forge; he even used a line from it in his Farewell Address. Historians disagree about the extent to which Washington deliberately emulated the play's hero. But there is little doubt that Roman stoicism, mediated through a British stage play written in 1713, exerted an indelible influence on America's first president. Like Franklin, Washington discovered a persona in a book.

Surely the most spectacular instance, however, of the Founding Fathers' use of books was provided by that other schol-

arly gentleman from Virginia, James Madison. In 1784, as the Articles of Confederation increasingly manifested their fatal flaws, the youthful protégé of Thomas Jefferson launched a comprehensive study of all previous confederations in history. What were their characteristic strengths and deficits? Why did they fail? How could Americans avoid a similar fate?

To facilitate his project, Madison required books, and for these he turned, appropriately, to Jefferson. In a letter dated March 16, 1784, Madison asked his friend to purchase for him "whatever may throw light on the general Constitution and droit public of the several confederacies which have existed." In a few months Jefferson was in Paris, and from France he sent back books by the score. Eventually, in the spring of 1787, after three years of determined investigation, Madison distilled his research into two memoranda and devised the Virginia Plan that framed the debate at the Constitutional Convention. Madison did not obtain all that he wanted in Philadelphia; in many respects the resultant Constitution was antithetical to what he desired. Nevertheless, without the self-imposed historical inquiry he undertook in 1784, and the uses to which he then put it, the very structure of our republic might have been very different indeed.

In surveying the role of books in the lives of the Founding Fathers, we must not overlook still another dimension: many of them were themselves creators of books, including several that have deservedly become classics. One thinks of Franklin's *Autobiography*, Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and Adams's *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*. One thinks of John Dickinson's *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* and the late-eighteenth century explosion of political pamphleteering to which I alluded earlier. One thinks also of Edmund Randolph's *History of Virginia*, unpublished until 1970. And, at the pinnacle, the *Federalist*, America's greatest contribution to political theory: a work produced by Madison, Hamilton, and Jay in just a matter of months. Is there anyone alive today who could accomplish a similar feat of intellect in the

same limited amount of time—and expect the product to be read two hundred years hence?

Sometimes, indeed, it seems that the men of 1776 and 1787 never stopped writing. Their literary output of all kinds was prodigious. Contemplate for a moment the monumental, scholarly enterprises that are now publishing in definitive form the papers of the principal Founding Fathers: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 27 volumes and now complete; *The Papers of James Madison*, 15 volumes so far; *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 25 volumes to date, and the editors have only reached the year 1778; *The Papers of George Washington*, 16 volumes (including 6 volumes of diaries) when I last checked the bookshelf. *The Papers of John Adams* fill so many volumes now that I have lost count. Somewhere I have read that Thomas Jefferson composed twenty-five thousand letters in his life. Whatever the figure, I do know this: when the magisterial Jefferson Papers publication project, initiated nearly forty years ago by Julian Boyd, is completed sometime in the next century, it will comprise more than 50 hefty volumes.

The Founding Fathers, then, were readers, collectors, users, and creators of books. A few of them went further and became founders of institutional libraries, thereby perpetuating their influence beyond the grave. The earliest to do this was Franklin. In 1731, the twenty-five-year-old Pennsylvania printer and his friends in a club known as the Junto established the Library Company of Philadelphia, the first subscription library in North America. The motive behind their initiative, as well as behind the Junto itself, was partly utilitarian: a yearning on the part of Franklin and his cohorts for "mutual improvement." What is less well known, perhaps, is that the idea of forming the Junto in the first place came from a book: the very essays by Cotton Mather that Franklin credited with changing his life.

In later years Franklin was a faithful patron of libraries. On trips to Europe he selected books for his Library Company and had the satisfaction of seeing it serve as a reference library

for the Constitutional Convention. He donated books to Harvard and Yale and to a town named after himself in Massachusetts. He helped to develop the library of the American Philosophical Society. In these forms of benefaction he was not alone. His fellow Pennsylvanian John Dickinson donated more than fifteen hundred volumes to Dickinson College after it was chartered in1783. In 1822 John Adams presented the remainder of his book collection (except for a few books that he wished to retain for "consolation" in his final days) to the town of Quincy, Massachusetts. Adams intended his books to be placed in a Greek and Latin academy; eventually, since the academy was never founded, the gift made its way to the Boston Public Library.

Undoubtedly the most sublime example of this beneficent impulse comes, fittingly enough, from those two Virginia soulmates, Madison and Jefferson. In 1783 Madison attempted to persuade the Continental Congress to establish a library for its own use. With customary meticulousness, and probably with Jefferson's behind-the-scenes assistance, he even compiled a list of three hundred prospective titles. Madison's motion failed when Congress, still recovering from the costly war for independence, refused to appropriate money for such a purpose. Not until 1800, in the administration of President Adams, did the government at last create the Library of Congress.

During the next decade or so this infant institution matured into a collection of three thousand volumes. Then, in the War of 1812, catastrophe struck. First, an American military expedition raided the capital of British-controlled Upper Canada and put its Parliament building, including the parliamentary library, to the torch. Intent on revenge, a British force of four thousand men invaded Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1814. As President Madison and his colleagues fled into the countryside, the enemy set fire to the White House and other public buildings, including the Capitol in which the Congressional Library was housed.

Outraged at these "devastations of British Vandalism," Thomas Jefferson, by then retired and living in Monticello, promptly offered his own library of nearly sixty-five hundred books as a replacement. The United States government accepted and paid him $23,950 for what its owner proudly described as "the choicest collection of books" in the nation. By one noble stroke the Library of Congress rose from its ashes in doubled size and acquired a breadth of holdings that foretold its emergence as a truly national library.

Even then, the aging bibliophile of the Blue Ridge was not done. No sooner had he parted with the cherished fruit of forty-five years of devoted book collecting than Jefferson, although heavily in debt, began to assemble another library in its place. By the time of his death barely a decade later, it embraced nearly a thousand volumes. More amazingly still, in these final years of his life Jefferson labored without stint to establish the University of Virginia and to design the repository of written knowledge that would be its crucial foundation. Not only did he personally select the university's first library—6,680 separate items—he also classified every single one of them and drew up the regulations for their use. His method of classification endured for more than eighty years.

I would not want you to conclude from all this that the Founding Fathers were somehow denizens of an ivory tower—"bloody-minded" intellectuals given to abstract, doctrinaire speculation. They were, as I said earlier, practical men of affairs. As John Dickinson told his fellow delegates in Independence Hall in the sweltering summer of 1787, "Experience must be our only guide. Reason may mislead us." But—and the historian Douglass Adair made this point years ago—the experience which Dickinson and his confreres brought to bear upon their deliberations was not simply their personal experience, rich and instructive though it was. It was the accumulated experience of past ages derived from books. The past was real to them. It mattered.

Their respect for what it could teach them was profound.

Gazing back upon these men from the perspective of two centuries, what are we to make of them now? Visiting them anew through their writings, as I have done recently, I cannot but marvel at how different their world was from our own. They lived in a nation of barely three million souls, of whom the vast majority were farmers. No telephones, no telegraph wires, no electronic mail system bound them in instant embrace. No automobiles, buses, or shuttle jets transported them swiftly from place to place. Theirs was a less cluttered existence, theirs the last era before the onset of the Age of Specialization. In 1787 it was possible for a single individual to encompass in a personal library of a few thousand titles most of the world's important store of knowledge. Today we live in an era in which forty thousand separate books are published in English each year, along with literally thousands of periodicals.

The generation of the Founders differs from today's in another respect. Unlike ourselves—their distant and often uncomprehending legatees—Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, and the rest had to struggle, both physically and intellectually, to create a free and independent polity. Remember: no other republic in history had ever survived very long or successfully established itself over such a vast expanse of territory. It was not hyperbole for the Founders to fear that if their experiment in government-making failed, the cause of republicanism would be discredited forever. It was not hyperbole for James Wilson, a signer of the Constitution, to tell the Pennsylvania ratifying convention that "on the success of the struggle America has made for freedom will depend the exertions of the brave and enlightened of all nations." As men who had endured both war and revolution, the framers of the Constitution had to grapple with the consequences of their deeds. For better or for worse, we do not have to preoccupy ourselves with the issues that so perplexed them. Their very success has freed us for other endeavors.

Yet if the Founding Fathers were inhabitants of a world that now seems long ago and far away, they nevertheless continue to hold more than antiquarian interest for us. Like Cato for George Washington, they challenge us with the power of their example and of their searching commitment to the cause we, too, profess to hold dear. James Madison once remarked, in words now inscribed on the front of the Madison Building of the Library of Congress: "What spectacle could be more edifying or more seasonable, than that of Liberty & Learning, each leaning on the other for their mutual and surest support?" Liberty and learning: the Founders believed earnestly that each required the other if either was to survive. Do we?

In our ever-accelerating "information age," dominated by the computer, the imagery of television, and the pervasiveness of musical sound, an age packed with fact yet increasingly devoid of cultural literacy, we can still derive inspiration from the fifty-five framers of the Constitution and their contemporaries who read, collected, used, and created books. Through books they sought both knowledge and self-knowledge, the means by which better to live. For them books were not irrelevancies but bulwarks against barbarism and tyranny.

Yes, it is fitting that this year of the Bicentennial of the Constitution is also the Year of the Reader. "I cannot live without books," said Jefferson. And neither, as a civilized people, can we.

COLOPHON

TYPE
Caslon Old Face No. 2

COMPOSITION
Graphic Composition, Inc., Athens, Georgia

COVER PAPER
Strathmore Beau Brilliant, Del Monte Red

TEXT PAPER
Mohawk Superfine, white, smooth

PRINTING
Bruce Printing, Inc., Cheverly, Maryland

DESIGN
Stephen Kraft, Washington, D.C.

ILLUSTRATION
Thomas Jefferson, a replica of a bust by Jean Antoine Houdon exhibited in the Great Hall of the Library of Congress Thomas Jefferson Building